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RESULTS

AMERICAN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX

E-GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION INDEX

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I. OVERVIEW

September 2003 marks an extension of the annual Government Satisfaction Index, produced through a partnership of the University of Michigan Business School, the American Society for Quality (ASQ), the CFI Group and ForeSee Results. This first quarterly installment of the E-Government Satisfaction Index reflects the growing importance of websites as a key delivery channel for government services and information. The continuing evolution of e-government's crucial role is augmented by the call for a more citizen-centric government, marked by key government initiatives such as the President's Management Agenda and the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

The web sites measured in the first installment are run by agencies that employ the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) methodology via ForeSee Results' online survey technology. Each of these agencies is proactively collecting data to ensure the ongoing development of a customer-driven approach to their sites. E-government is still relatively new, both on the user side and on the provider side. This makes it more difficult to know what it takes to do well, and more importantly, to pioneer new methods of delivery that will set the tone for the future. The scores indicate an "industry" very much in the making.

The ACSI methodology is a statistically and scientifically rigorous measurement of satisfaction—a highly reliable and definitive statement on citizens' current attitudes and likely future behavior resulting from their actual experience and attitudes. The University of Michigan's ACSI methodology is useful for government agencies looking to make decisions about online resource allocation because it can isolate key drivers of satisfaction, predict future behaviors, and allow comparisons to other benchmarks established by the ACSI in both the private and public sectors.

II. METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted using the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) methodology. The ACSI is a cross-industry measure of customer satisfaction produced quarterly by the University of Michigan. Each government web site included has been rated by its visitors, and that rating has been converted through the ACSI methodology into a score on a 0-100 point scale.

A key distinguishing feature of the ACSI methodology is its patented scientific approach to customer satisfaction measurement and its impact on future customer behavior. The technology behind the ACSI computes scores that reflect performance based on the relative impacts of various components of satisfaction, on overall satisfaction, and the likelihood of desirable future behaviors, such as repeat visitors. Accordingly, the ACSI approach is able to isolate and determine the importance of the features and functions most likely to produce these behaviors—an important distinction from basic customer satisfaction ratings.

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II. OVERVIEW: THE PERFORMANCE AND STATE OF E-GOVERNMENT

The E-Government Satisfaction Index currently includes 22 government web sites, which provides the best snapshot available anywhere of the state of e-government at the federal level. In many ways, analysis reveals that the real story in e-government is one of the states of evolution in this non-commercial environment. E-government is obviously different from the commercial sector, which competes for profits and, like all true free markets, weeds out the weak and rewards the strong as determined by the flow of money and driven by satisfied consumers.

Despite the fact that e-government is, by and large, not subject to the kind of market forces that drive organizations to deliver customer satisfaction, some government web sites are earning scores that place them among the very best. Even more compelling, e-government is increasingly turning to citizen/user evaluation of their performance as the ultimate determinant of success, in some cases even more so than the private sector. E-government is still relatively early in its evolution, and agencies are still working to find the right formula. Accordingly, some agencies are doing better than others. But the fact that so many are formulating their approaches based on citizen feedback should accelerate the process. Remember that the early days of commercial e-business existed, to a great degree, in a bubble of unreality in which many companies that were superficially successful (e.g. in terms of venture capital) also had little if anything to do with what or how consumers wanted to interact with the web.

Why is e-government even trying to improve customer satisfaction, absent market forces? Federal agencies are responding to the President's clearly articulated directives on e-government. Even some agencies that will always have a difficult time getting positive evaluations from users are nonetheless putting themselves on the line by soliciting user feedback and publicly articulating their desire to satisfy. This is no small thing. Agencies such as the IRS do something that most people do not like, and this cannot help but be reflected in the satisfaction scores they receive. Other agencies have very narrow, specific mandates, exacting audiences, and limited resources. This makes achieving high satisfaction more difficult than it would be for most in the private sector, where organizations seek a specific customer base they want to serve.

The Path to Successful E-Government

E-government has certain strengths it can leverage to be successful. The evolution of e-government is to re-organize information and services in accordance with how users think and want to interact, as opposed to the way government is organized. E-government is increasingly successful at this. The top-scoring site in this report, the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) web site (www.4women.gov), is a case in point. FirstGov.gov, too, had a great surge in its satisfaction levels after it re-organized the way it presents services and information—and FirstGov.gov has continually sought citizen inputs in both scientific and anecdotal fashions to drive the evolution of its site.

When agencies are able to make themselves more user-driven, they have the additional advantage of the trustworthiness of the government. In the sea of questionable sources on the Internet today, government agencies serving as information sources tend to provide stability, comfort, and reliability sought after by Internet users everywhere. NWHIC's women's health site does a good job of presenting an interface that matches expectations created by the best commercial web sites in terms of look and feel, navigation, and related matters. But it has the added value of the credibility of Health and Human Services (HHS) itself, and it wisely balances a commercial-looking interface with the prominence of the HHS logo.

Factors Driving E-Government Evolution
ForeSee Results' ongoing analysis of e-government performance and evaluation of the forces driving e-government show that agencies are increasingly driven to make e-government work.

A few specific factors seem to be consistently in play. The President's mandates for e-government have an impact on agencies' initiative. As research on organizational behavior shows time and again, clear leadership and goal articulation in and of themselves have had an impact on performance. There are also budget issues that come into play, and agencies realize this. Effective e-government consistently translates into decreased costs for service provision, which allows better allocation of resources. To be both effective in service provision and to fulfill the mandate of government leadership, quality service provision on the web becomes an important organizational goal for government agencies.

Individual Agency Performance: Analysis
E-government scores range widely. The top-performing site in this measurement is a woman's health site operated by HHS. Other top performers include a varying set of services—sites managed by NASA to provide public information, employment sites operated by the State Department and the Office of Personnel Management, a USDA research site, and the very ambitious portal approach of FirstGov.gov. (The IRS is measured in the Government Satisfaction Index released annually by the University of Michigan. IRS' e-filing capability is a consistently strong performer.)

The National Women's Health Information Center website is one that has done a particularly good job of taking the "government approach" out of its web site. Its interface looks commercial, and is very similar in quality and appearance to what web users generally experience on the better commercial sites. It does not break with the government, however, retaining a clear link to the reliability communicated by its parent, the Department of Health and Human Services. Fundamentally, this site earns high scores because it organizes information well and is largely in line with how even a casual surfer would expect to encounter this information.

NASA's web sites are well-regarded by the public, and the scores indicate that sites represent NASA well—conveying a good and valuable image. NASA actually has commercial competition, in a sense, but NASA is clearly superior to that competition. The agency offers crisp, well-organized sites, a "non-government" appearance, and addresses specific types of needs its constituencies have rather than imposing unwanted material on surfers. NASA is also seen by the public as being very knowledgeable about its topic area.

Job-search sites do not always score well. Commercial job-search sites also measured using ACSI methodology exhibit scores competitive with those of the federal agency sites included in this Index. Clearly, both commercial and non-commercial job-search is a still-evolving function. Even in a tough economy, the quality of this function can have a direct impact on the quality of talent attracted. Continuing evolution in this area is vital if the government is to compete effectively for top talent.

Online government in general remains an area in transition. E-government is still early in its evolution. This is partly because the government was slower to jump on the Internet bandwagon, and partly because economic pressures did not exist to force most government sites beyond the early-generation approaches. In fact, while the private sector often over-spent on unnecessary site evolutions that did little to improve customer satisfaction in many cases, government sites frequently stayed at the rudimentary end of the spectrum simply because funds were lacking to improve. Government has also had policy restrictions that generally have deprived it of important Internet tools such as depending on the use of cookies.

The transition to online government is also much more demanding than for many private sector organizations. For instance, news and information sites (which tend to score in the 70's) had a low hurdle to go online. They essentially took the material they produced the "old" way and put it on the web. Even most e-commerce sites did not have that far to go initially. They took what they sold offline and put it on a web site. For government, determining what and how to do things online is much less clear. Government also has a much wider range of "customers" to serve online, in general, from wealthy to poor, from Internet-savvy to those who have essentially no Internet access. And some agencies face issues with constituencies preferring not to receive information or services on the web.

Budget-tightening is one force that may fuel a compressed evolution for e-government. Many government agencies measured in this report are clearly early in their life cycle. A key insight from the scores is that many agencies are using this come-from-behind position as an opportunity to make government web sites much more driven by what citizens and users in general want, rather than the other way around. While that may result in lower near-term scores, it suggests that government sites will evolve according to user needs, something it took the private sector a long time to come around to. This will not necessarily translate immediately into higher scores, but it is the right impetus.

The lower scores on the table are all of agencies that are early in their evolution. All of these agencies are self-measuring, however, they are interested in determining the best user-driven path forward. In most cases, the blend of organizing information in citizen-centric ways, having user interfaces that are attractive and easy, and by not giving up their government credibility will be the way forward.

Agency or Office	Website	Satisfaction Scores
Aggregate Federal Government Agency Score		**70.9**
Corporation for National and Community Service	CNS Main website www.cns.gov	63
Department of Agriculture	Economic Research Service (ERS) www.ers.usda.gov	76
Department of Agriculture	Forest Service www.fs.fed.us	69
Department of Labor	Employment Standards Administration— Department of Labor www.union-reports.dol.gov	58
Department of State	Careers.state www.careers.state.gov	73
Department of State	Department of State main www.state.gov	72
Department of State	International Information Programs (IIP) www.usinfo.state.gov	69
Department of State	Geography website http://geography.state.gov	61
Department of Transportation	DOT main website www.dot.gov	55
Department of the Treasury	Treasury main website www.treasury.gov	64
Federal Aviation Administration	FAA main website www.faa.gov	62
FirstGov	FirstGov.gov www.firstgov.gov	74
General Accounting Office (GAO)	GAO main website www.gao.gov	66
General Services Administration (GSA)	GSA main website www.gsa.gov	56
General Services Administration (GSA)	GSA Advantage website www.gsaadvantage.gov	66
Health and Human Services (HHS)	Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) www.healthfinder.gov	73
Health and Human Services (HHS)	Office on Women's Health National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) Website Users www.4women.gov	83
NASA	NASA Main Site www.nasa.gov	79
NASA	NASA Education Program (6 sites) education.nasa.gov	78
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)	Mapfinder www.oceanservice.noaa.gov/mapfinder	51
Office of Personnel Management (OPM)	Job search www.usajobs.opm.gov	71
Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC)	PBGC www.pbgc.gov	66

Sites like FirstGov.gov provide a value and utility to all government sites by providing a launch pad for citizens to navigate through the numerous government sites now available. FirstGov.gov facilitates painless e-government web site identification by helping visitors locate information contained on a particular site. In fact, those sites that serve as information gateways do well in the eye of the citizen and create a sense of community for the user. These sites are citizen-centric in nature, rather than government focused.

When the overall satisfaction score of 70.9 is broken down and the elements of satisfaction are assessed (i.e., how happy are citizens with navigation, search, etc.), we see government sites excelling in areas such as image, look and feel, and content (providing information). Although individual challenge areas for government web sites vary according to agency, in the aggregate we see that navigation, functionality and search are the biggest problems on government web sites.

When asked about future behaviors (likelihood to return or recommend) citizens score these government sites well, although the full range of satisfaction scores in this area indicate there is room for improvement.

III. COMPARISON

One of the advantages of the ACSI methodology is that its uniform application allows comparisons across industries and sectors. Overall, the aggregate online government score of 70.9 scores just above the score for offline government and compares well to the ACSI Q2 e-business score of 71.4. However the e-government sector is almost three full points behind the ACSI National Average (73.8).

- ACSI E-Government Aggregate: 70.9
- ACSI Offline Government Aggregate Score: 70.2
- ACSI Overall National Aggregate of all Goods and Services: 73.8
- ACSI E-Commerce Aggregate: 77.6
- ACSI E-Business Aggregate: 71.4
- Offline Social Security Administration: 83
- IRS (paper tax filers): 53
- Amazon.com: 88
- Google.com: 82
- Yahoo.com: 78
- ABCNews.com: 74

It is an indication of how successful online government has already been in satisfying customers that the e-government site with the highest score (National Women's Health Information Center site, HHS) not only beats out private sector companies like Yahoo.com and ABCNews.com, but rubs elbows with Amazon.com and Google.com with scores that get into the 80's.

IV. MEASURING SATISFACTION ON GOVERNMENT WEB SITES

In general, many government web sites can be expected to make progress and improve their scores—but will always face special challenges. A key issue is whether they can face the pain of scores that will sometimes be relatively low compared to the private sector, and keep delivering and improving satisfaction among their constituencies. If they do, there is much in it for everyone. Making online government the preferred channel for citizen interaction with agencies is important for several reasons, not the least of which is cost reduction, an interface that is more citizen-driven (e.g. hours of availability), and the ability to provide higher-quality, more consistent information. These are key reasons for the President's e-government initiative and recent focus on the key role of e-government. In addition, government web sites face channel conflict with more established communication channels and have the ability to offer citizens access to information at a much lower cost than call centers or government offices.

However, in order for citizens to continue and increase usage of the online channel to interact with the federal government, they must be satisfied with their online experiences. Although government web sites must continue to use a variety of metrics to improve and evaluate their web sites, they must pay attention to the missing metric: customer satisfaction. Government web sites have a natural advantage over other channels to provide the 5 "Cs":

• Convenience—information and services provided 24/7, when and where citizens want it
• Cost—lower cost of delivery to the citizen
• Consistency—ability to deliver the same quality information to everyone
• Communication—increased speed of information dissemination
• Community—new face of government to the citizen

The willingness of the web sites measured in the first installment of the E-Government Satisfaction Index shows that much like the private sector, federal government web sites are starting to embrace the importance of measuring citizen satisfaction. This is an encouraging sign as the value of government web sites continues to rise.

VI. THE ROAD TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The current success of e-government can be credited to the government's appreciation of the long-term importance and value of providing a high level of customer satisfaction online. The online government services measured by the ACSI should be commended for their clear understanding of the critical role that consistent measurement of satisfaction plays.

By utilizing the ACSI methodology, they are able to identify which areas of improvement will yield the biggest returns in satisfaction and drive the desired future behaviors of the user population. This ability to effectively prioritize improvements has helped these sites optimize their efforts and maximize their returns.

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The performance of the federal government web sites re-enforces the value that web sites provide in the delivery of services and information. While many of these web sites are relatively new, it is expected that they will continue to be enhanced and improved. The future looks bright for a long-lasting and increasingly successful role for web sites in the delivery of services and information from an increasingly citizen-centric government.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry Freed is an expert on Web Effectiveness and Web Customer Satisfaction. He is also President and CEO of ForeSee Results, a market leader in customer satisfaction measurement on the web, which utilizes the methodology of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI).

THE AMERICAN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX

The ACSI is a national economic indicator of customer evaluations of the quality of goods and services available to household consumers in the United States. It measures 7 economic sectors, 40 industries (including e-commerce), and approximately 200 companies and government agencies—accounting for almost half of the U.S. economy. Established in 1994, the ACSI tracks trends in customer satisfaction and provides valuable benchmarking insights of the consumer economy. The Index is produced by a partnership of the University of Michigan Business School, American Society for Quality (ASQ) and CFI Group. ForeSee Results sponsors the e-commerce, e-business and e-government indices. The Federal Consulting Group, a franchise within the Department of the Treasury, is the executive agent for the ACSI and the federal government.

ABOUT FORESEE RESULTS

ForeSee Results is a top-rated web satisfaction management company. We utilize the methodology of the most respected, credible and well-known measure of customer satisfaction in the country, the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), to link customer satisfaction to measurable business results. We measure customer satisfaction and identify the impact that satisfaction improvements have on future behaviors. ForeSee Results is a privately held company located in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

ABOUT FEDERAL CONSULTING GROUP

The Federal Consulting Group is the franchise of the U.S. Department of the Treasury that assists federal agencies in improving their overall performance with a special focus on customer service. The Federal Consulting Group is the executive agent for the ACSI and holds general clearance from the Office of Management and Budget for ACSI surveys.

For More Information

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